

[Mrs. Martha Ellen Devan]

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Life History

Mrs. Martha Ellen Devan

1713 [S?]. Church-st.,

Jacksonville,

Florida.

Rose Shepherd—Writer.

MRS. MARTHA ELLEN DEVAN,

PIONEER.

We met on the [crossing?] at Main an Adams Street on a busy Saturday afternoon. She saw me first, she on the inside and I on the outside of the busy traffic lane of shoppers, and pushing her way through, clasped my hand and placed her arm around my shoulder in happy greeting. I was glad to see my 74-year old friend, and as I noted how strong and straight and tall she was, one glance at her face showed me she was not in the best of health.

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"How are you?" I questioned, as I turned and arm an arm we made our way to the Andrew Jackson Hotel corner, where as the crowd surged around us at this busy point, we stood [and?] [held?] a reunion, for I had missed her for some weeks form our usual haunts.

"Not so good," she replied. "I have been down to John's in Miami for three months, and while there I had my teeth out at his insistence, as they were in bad condition - the dentist said I should have done this years ago, and that it will be [some?] time before the poison gets out of my system."

I remarked on the apparent good fit and natural appearance of her "[store?] teeth", as she called them, and [inquired?] about John and his family.

John Devan was reared in Jacksonville, studied law, and in the 1920's became Probate Judge of Duval County. His friends were 2 [legion?], but in his mother's opinion "John was too popular. He drew a good salary, but looked like he could never get ahead financially." So, then there was a [splendid?] opening with a well known law firm in Miami, he removed with his family, to the southern [metropolis?] of Florida eight years ago. Reports came back to Jacksonville of his advancement in his profession, of his apparent prosperity, with rumors he would be a candidate for governor of Florida in the 1940 election.

"Oh, they are all fine. The children are in college, the two older ones, the younger in Junior High, and John is so busy we always had to catch [him?] on the run to talk with him. He is in politics up to his eyebrows, but it does not make any difference what you hear to the contrary, John is a good boy - he'll be able to take care of himself. (John is 55 years of age, but is still a "boy" to his [doting?] mother).

"Yes, he is smart, and while politics is a treacherous game, [even for?] the most experienced, John's many friends in Jacksonville are not uneasy, and will all support him if he decides to come out as a candidate for the highest office the State can [bestow?]," I answered.

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"I enjoyed Miami. John has a new home near Miami Beach, and in his plans he had a room built especially for me, with some of my old furniture installed - a bed and dresser, and the chair in which I used to rock him to sleep, so I always feel at home. Yes, John is a good boy. He's been raised right - you know people have to have principles to live and labor by - and John is well balanced."

"Are you living alone in your home here?" I asked

"Oh, no. I'm never alone. I have the best [children?] in the world, and while none of them are living here right now, when I 3 I am in the old [house?], [there?] is always some of the grandchildren. Louise came down from South Carolina, the day before I arrived, and had everything in order when I came in last Sunday evening.

"I'll have to be on my way now, as I still have some groceries to get for tomorrow's dinner - my car is parked up by the Courthouse, where I've had a special spot reserved for years.

"Did you say you had some tickets for the moving picture to be sponsored by the [Eastern?] Star Chapter next week? Well, give me about ten. I'll go through John's old office when I [come?] down Monday to see about my taxes - most of the old employees who used to work for him [are?] still there. I'll romp all over them and sell every one of those tickets before I leave."

She laughed slyly in [reminiscence?] at the good nature of John's old office help, and the readiness with which they purchased tickets for benefits, balls, and other entertainments she is interested in - her Church affiliations, her [Eastern?] Star Chapter, her [???] Chapter in all of which she is an active participant and supporter.

"If you'll be down on the Courthouse steps on the North side Monday at 2 o'clock, I'll pick you up and we'll go home and have a nice visit." And thus we parted.

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You may be sure that I was there at 2 p. m. on the appointed spot, and so was Mrs. Devan, [for?] she is a business woman, with neither time nor words to squander.

Her business transacted, here she came, her eyes bright and sparkling.

"You do not wear glasses, do you, Mrs. Devan."

"No, not when I'm traipsing around like this. I don't need 4 them. John used to say - 'mother, I do believe you can see from here to Texas!' (John is evidently the favorite of her five children). Of course, I have a pair of reading glasses in my purse, if I have to sign papers or any emergency comes up that I need to read something. But glasses are not necessary for what I do mostly now."

"What is that?"

"Remembering! Just remembering!"

By this time we are in the car, not a new model, but a good one and in good condition. She swung it around, made for [Duval?] Street, and straight across the [viaduct?] to her home on East Church Street in East Jacksonville.

All this part of town is do dear to me. You know about ten years ago, my children thought I should move over into the Riverside section. [?] owned some property on Park-Street, and nothing would do but for me to move into it. I did, even transferred my membership form the Fairfield Methodist Church, where our family had attended so long and joined the Riverside Park Methodist Church. But I never felt at home - there were so many strangers, and I missed my old friends and neighbors. So after three years, I came back over here."

By this time / we had arrived; she had steered the car into the driveway. It was a big old rambling house, with wide porches, two lovely magnolia trees which had grown up with the neighborhood - on either side of the old fashioned brick walk to the front steps -

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vines, [trollises?] with roses, [beds?] of azaleas - a magnificent [wisteria?] forty years old covering the posts of the porch had reached out to the liveoak tree at the corner, and one could picture the heavy purple blooms in the early spring and summer among the glossy leaves and the gray strands of Spanish moss.

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The front door, with its frame outlined with squares of colored glass - blue, red, amber - of a period in vogue fifty years ago, opened as if by magic, [and?] a smiling colored girl, [neatly?] dressed in a black house dress with white lawn apron and a maid's cap with a black ribbon band, [bade?] us "come in."

"This is Martha [Ellen?]," said Mrs. Devan.

"Named after you?" I [queried?].

"I such was," said Martha Ellen, "and I think it's the purtiest [name?] in the world. I belongs to the family, tho' my last name's Dawson."

Mrs. Devan did not seem to [be at?] all embarrassed at this joining in the conversation by the maid, and laughingly said - "Martha Ellen in granddaughter of the Martha we brought from South Carolina, when Mr. Devan and I came down here from our native State in 1890."

The entrance hall opened into a comfortable living-room, well furnished, a worn rug on the floor, the furniture of food substantial walnut, the comfortable rocking chairs with their high curved backs, the home made cushions, all bespoke an intelligent effort to combine good selections with lasting qualities to make a room that [could be?] lived in by home folks, as well as visitors. The October sun came through the long south and west windows, with their draperies of starched [scrim?] and bright [flosered?] chintz.

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The rocker by the low walnut table with its lamp and a basket with sewing material looked as if it might be the favorite resting spot of Mrs. Devan, and as I hesitated on being asked to sit down, sure enough she went directly to this rocker, [and as she?] seated herself she said:

"I feel I've grown up here, and my life history would really be the history of Fairfield and its surroundings.

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"I was born in [Sardis?], South Carolina, on October 11, 1864. I was the youngest of a family of ten. My three older brothers served in the War between the States, but my father and mother were gray-haired from the time I could remember.

"We went through the usual [vicissitudes?] of the Southerners of that [section?] in War times, my father being too old to [enter?] service, he staid at home and kept on running the general store. My earliest recollections are of playing around the porch in the front of the store, which was also the post office, and of listening to the conversations of the neighbors and the country folk as they came to purchase or to inquire for mail. You know a general store carried everything, dry goods - as [piece?] goods was designated [-?] buttons, thread, yarn - all the women [crocheted?] and knitted, especially gloves and stockings, as these articles could not be secured [then?], since no factories manufactured them in those days. Then there were the staple groceries - sugar, coffee, flour, etc. The country people brought in butter, eggs, sidemeat, hams, bacon, dried apples, pears, peaches, etc., and traded these - a [peculiar?] system of 'to have and have not.' They all had accounts at the store, and my father's accounts of [?] and credit were most interesting. [A quarter?] of beef, [5.00?]; a [?], [\$1.76?]; a bushel of dried peaches, [60¢?]; 3 yards of homespun [jeans?] - (this was much in demand for the making of men's suits, and women made them, too, by the way) - [\$2.60?] per yard; 10 dozen fresh eggs at 10¢ per dozen; honey 5¢ per pound. There were no canned vegetables and fruits, like we can buy now, and there was no home canning. Preserving of fruits - [pears, peaches?] plums, apples, by

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cooking them thoroughly in honey and placing in three gallon jars or churns of stone-ware - was the only [means?] of carrying these over [for?] winter use. Our food was all fresh and of good quality. [We had plenty of good?] fresh milk, buttermilk, meats, 7 and fresh vegetables in season. Our family was all strong and healthy. One of my brothers was lost in the War, but the other two came back home in 1865.

"Of course, I do not remember much about the Reconstruction period, but by the time I was [?] family was fairly prosperous and I was sent to the Columbia Female Academy, at Columbia, S.C., to complete my education. There were no free schools. I received my early training at home, and later attended a subscription school or two of six months - schools where the teacher charged a dollar a month per pupil, usually having twenty or so at a term.

"There were no co-eds in those days. The boys went away to college, to Harvard and Yale, if the family could afford it, to Lexington to attend Washington and Lee, or to [Suwannee?].

"We were especially [?] in [?] at the Columbia Female Academy, always made to remember [we?] were ladies with bearing and manner accordingly. [A?] teacher was always with us, even when we went out for our daily walks and exercise. There were about sixty young ladies when I attended.

"We were taught music and painting, sewing - that is, [fine?] sewing, embroidering, and all sorts of handwork. Morning and evening there was prayer or service, and of [course?] on Sundays [?] went in [a?] body to [attend?] services at the local Episcopal Church. We cultivated a taste for good literature, the classics, poetry, novels, of established reputation, read '[The Scottish Thiefs?]', [??] Scott's books, Milton and Shakespeare.

"I finished school when I was eighteen, and later in the summer met Mr. Edgar Charles Dubose at [Timmonsville?], S.C., and we were married a year later.

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" [?] In 1890 we came to Florida with our three children, 8 locating at Hawthorne, a thriving railroad [juntion?] in a section of Florida that was just being opened up, and where Mr. Devan had purchased a [large acreage?].

"We brought Martha and John, our negro servants, from Timmons ville, but they were not used to farm work, neither were we, so in 1894 we had an opportunity to trade the farm and grove for a section of Fairfield, in Jacksonville, and came here bringing Martha and John with us.

"On the corner of that next lot across the street, Mr. Devan established a real estate office. [As?] I had always kept my father's books at the store, after [?] became a suitable age, it was only natural that I should help my husband.

"Our family had by now [increased?] to two boys and three girls. The first year in Jacksonville, we lost our [second son?]. There was plenty of work at the house and the office, so we [sent?] to Timmons ville for Martha and John's two young daughters. One helped with the housework and children's care, the other took care of the office, and ran the errands, Martha did the cooking, and John took care of the horses and acted as coachman.

"Those were busy, happy years. We prospered. Several years later, we took in a store at Oakland and Florida-ave., on a real estate deal, and I ran the store. The children were away at school, so we did not need so many horses, and I took John to help with the heavy work and to act as handyman around the store. It was a busy life. We had 'notions' as they were called - thread, buttons, hoods and eyes, dressmakers' findings - most of these things out of style in this age of zippers and snappers - and I carried some piece goods.

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"Was the store ever held up?" I asked, recalling a brutal hold-up and murder of the proprietor of a soft drink establishment in the same neighborhood a year ago.

"Mercy, No! I never thought of such a thing. That was a nice neighborhood, thirty years ago, the [streetcars?] past the door, negroes lived all around, in fact, they were some of my best customers, but they were working, law-abiding residents, and it never entered my mind to be afraid.

"I usually took in around ten to fifteen dollars per day, as the women would rather patronize me than take the long trip to town, as Jacksonville was called.

"Yes, I am a firm believer in the Church and its influence. We joined the Fairfield Methodist Church, which was near our home, and all of our children attended the Sunday School and Church services from the time they were little youngsters.

"I have always been a firm believer in Jacksonville. It has splendid opportunities for everybody. My daughters are scattered - one with her [familyng?] in Washington, D. C., one in Daytona Beach, and one in West Palm Beach, and a granddaughter married and living in Charleston. But all are near enough that I can visit them when I feel like it, and we are to have a grand Christmas home-coming this year - everybody will be here.

And so I left this friendly woman who had made a success of her life and that of her five children, happy and contented in her declining years, but not helpless, still active and interested in her church and other organizations of which she is a member.

But a week later she did not arise at her usual hour. Martha Ellen coming on duty at seven o'clock knocked softly on the bedroom door, and heard a groan. She rushed in, and found Mrs. Devan had suffered a stroke. The doctor was called, the children all came home, but "it is just a matter of time," said the physician.

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"If I can just last through Christmas!" Moaned Mrs. Devan. And she did. All the neighbors knew of her wish, the married son and his family, the three daughters and their families - all were there. The house was a bower of flowrs and greenery, there was fine Christmas tree, with presents for all the family, for the old friends and neighbors, for old John and Martha, for young Martha Ellen and her generation.

Friday morning Mrs. Devan passed away in her sleep, and on Sunday the funeral was held in the Fairfield Methodist Church which she had attended for forty years, where she had served, and willingly labored as its affairs needed her cheering presence.

The preacher was a personal friend. Of the two hundred who crowded int the church, most of them were her personal friends, and on the outside were many more unable to enter the small auditorium.

In the front pew next to the piano were old John's young John, Martha, Martha Ellen and Mary, and a young Negro music teacher, who had coached the four in a hymn which had cheered Mrs. Devan in her hours of suffering when they came to the house regularly in their spare time. [At?] the close of the funeral sermon, the preacher announced the group would sing, and as the soft Negro voices carried through the church, with one of the girls Mary playing the [accompaniament?] - "He'll Understand and say - 'Well Done' - there was not a dry eye among the audience. I asked on the of the singers, "Did you know mrs. Devan?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I worked for Mrs. Devan, and my mammy and grandmamy before me. I fus [rec'kecks?] playin in the [?] on [?] and Florida Avenue. What's I [gwine?] to to now? I'se [gwine?] home with Miss Bessie to Daytona Beach in the mornin."